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DEMOCRACY

Democracy has a simple meaning: “Rule by the people”. But the meaning of ‘people’ and ‘rule’ are far from straightforward. The historical geography of democracy therefore the ongoing process of finding answers to various *practical* problems: *who* should rule; *how* rule should be organised; and over *what* scope of activities. But these practical issues are internally related to questions of *justification*, which means that democracy is a highly contested concept in both theory and practice. As a result, the empirical analysis of democratic politics can’t avoid issues of normative democratic theory.

Modern democratic theory depends on a distinctive geographical imagination. It assumes that democracy is framed by bounded territories, involving a nested hierarchy of scales contained within the nation-state. Key thinkers of this tradition focussed considerable attention on the geographical organisation of democratic politics in complex, spatially extensive territories (Dahl 1989). The limitations of this territorial framing of democracy are increasingly subjected to critical investigation in political science (Shapiro and Hacker-Cordón 1999).

Until very recently, there has been little explicit focus in human geography on the normative questions which are at the core of debates about the relationship between democracy and spatiality. This is due to the avoidance in political geography of reflection on the normative basis of political issues. However, the 1990s saw a shift in various sub-disciplines towards investigating the entwinement of practical issues with normative issues central to democratic theory, e.g. issues of *participation* in development geography; issues of *deliberation* in urban planning; issues of citizenship in environmental studies. Aspects of democratic theory are now present across human geography (Barnett and Low 2004).

Electoral geography is the sub-field in which the geographies of democracy have always been a concern. Much of this concern has been focussed on mapping distributions of votes, but recent attention has focussed on developing more sophisticated, spatially sensitive explanations for voting behaviour (Agnew 1996). The spatial organisation of electoral systems effects how votes are translated into representative majorities in liberal democracies. The spatial organisation of formal democracy therefore has consequences for democratic outcomes in terms of basic criteria of equality and representativeness. Research on this process has broadened out to include the geographies of campaigning, party-formation, and political communication. This has also involved more explicit considerations of the normative issues at stake in the traditional issues such as gerrymandering, re-districting and representation (Hannah 2001, Johnston 1999).

The last two decades have seen the global ‘diffusion of democracy’, in the wake of the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, political transitions away from authoritarianism in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and the application of norms of ‘Good Governance’ in the geopolitics of Western international engagements.

Geographers have investigated the degree to which the adoption of democratic forms of governance can be accounted for by specifically geographical factors (O'Loughlin *et al* 1998), contributing to renewed debates concerning whether democracy can only be established and sustained after various socio-economic and cultural prerequisites have been met (Przeworski 1995). The theoretical assumptions and the practical devices through which liberal forms of electoral democracy have been circulated as the global norm have also been critically interrogated (Bell and Stacheli 2001). Debates about *democratization* raise fundamental questions regarding the degree to which the norms of Western, liberal, representative democracy can and should be practically applied in non-Western contexts and deployed as normative benchmarks of critical analysis (Slater 2002). The geographical mobility of democratic practices suggests that the devices through which different imperatives of democratic rule are enacted can be combined, adapted and re-ordered in different geographical contexts (Saward 2003). This points to the importance of issues of temporal sequencing and spatial organisation to the successful institutionalisation of the complex, competing imperatives of democratic deliberation, decision-making, accountability, participation and revision (Dryzek 2005).

Criticisms of liberal, representative democracy that assumes the nation-state as the natural container of democratic politics have encouraged geographers to give increasing attention is given to various alternative models of democracy. In contrast to the focus of electoral geography on the formal democratic procedures of elections, voting, and parties, geographers have turned to notions of participatory democracy and radical democracy to consider the diverse practices and sites where questions of accountability, citizenship, justice and participation are contested (Young 2000). One feature of these explorations is a commitment to thinking of democracy as more than simply a procedure for legitimizing the decisions of centralised bureaucracies. Models of *deliberative democracy* are now in the ascendant in democratic theory, implying much more active role of citizens in all facets of decision-making, as well as the extension of democratic norms to a far wider array of activities. These sorts of arguments are often associated with calls for the *decentralisation* of decision-making and political participation to sub-national scales of regions and cities. At the same time, there is increasing attention given to emergent forms of transnational democracy (Anderson 2002), focussing on the degree to which systems of globalised economic and political governance can be subordinated to democratic oversight (Held 1996). In this work in particular, there is increasing attention given to the diverse 'agents of justice' through which democratic justice can be pursued and secured (O'Neill 2001), moving beyond an exclusive focus on states as the privileged containers of democratic politics (cf. Low 2003). This emphasis on the global dimensions of democratic politics has two important implications for geographical research in these areas. Firstly, it indicates that, rather than opposing representative to participatory forms of democracy, any viable form of democratic polity is likely to combine aspects of these practices in different ways. For both practical and normative reasons, representation seems an irreducible aspect of any viable, pluralistic model of democracy. Not only do representative procedures enable the *time-space distancing* of democratic politics, but they also embody important principles of difference and non-identity within the *demos* (Barnett 2003). Representation is also an unavoidable mechanism for the integration of so-called 'mute interests', e.g. future generations or non-human actors, which concerns with environmental futures has made a much more imperative consideration for democratic theory (Goodin 2003). The second reason why the globalisation of democracy is significant is because it suggests a move beyond the predominant territorial framing of the spatiality of democracy. Rather than thinking simply in terms of the need to articulate sub-national and national scales with global scales, discussions of these

topics increasingly focus on the diverse spatialities of democracy, ones which articulate territorial and non-territorial practices, scalar and non-scalar conceptualisations of space (Low 1997).

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Suggested Reading

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